DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 295 SP 011 143

AUTHOR Cooper, John E.
TITLE The Politics of Local Public Education: Some Problems With Power Analysis.
PUB DATE May 76
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Data Collection; Interaction Process Analysis; Measurement Techniques; *Political Power; *Public Education; *Research Needs; *Research Problems; *Social Science Research; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

Four problems are identified concerning politics and power as they relate to public schooling. The first problem is the definition of basic terms and the development of a vocabulary common to researchers investigating the field. Second is the problem of collecting information on and evidence of the political process. This problem is complicated by (1) the need to overcome obstacles such as the privacy of the decision making process, (2) the intangible and idiosyncratic nature of power reality, (3) the need for identifying suitable data-gathering techniques, and (4) the need for a theoretical base of power analysis. The third problem concerns power measurement and its quantification, and its interpretation as a possession or a relationship. The final problem concerns the phenomenon of change and fluctation in power configurations. The importance of power analysis in studying and understanding the forces controlling schools is stressed. (ME)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED141295

THE POLITICS OF LOCAL PUBLIC EDUCATION: SOME PROBLEMS WITH POWER ANALYSIS

If politics is the process by which power is brought into play and if power pertains to such matters as allocating values among individuals and groups, controlling individuals and groups, and making decisions and setting policies which affect individuals and groups--then schools are political institutions and operating them is a political process.

The myth that our schools have been removed from politics is fictional. However, by perpetuating slogans such as "Schools and politics don't mix," the interests of those elites who control the schools are well served. Behind this myth is the belief that schools should not be abused by partisan politics or by narrow interest groups outside the school. A corollary to this premise (in some instances unperceived by those in control who propagate it) is paternal actions and decisions quietly made by those with authority do not constitute politics, even when the results have far-reaching social consequences.

It is not difficult to make a case for the importance of the concepts of politics and power as they relate to public schooling. That which affects something we have paid dearly for and affirm to be of great individual and collective importance merits serious consideration. Certainly our schools pass these two tests; therefore once it is evident that politics and power are concepts which apply to the operation of schools as fully as to other examples of governance, it becomes apparent these are consequential subjects.

Although one may be convinced that determining how our schools are run and who runs them are interesting and vital subjects for both professionals and laymen, problems hinder their serious study. In this article four of these problems are described. They are: (1) defining basic terms, (2) collecting evidence, (3) measuring evidence, and (4) coping with change.

SP011 143

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Probably every specialization known to man possesses its own peculiar vocabulary. Vocabularies exist for vocational, religious, recreational, military, social, and a host of other divergent pursuits. Within their own field specialists employ sublanguage to serve their purposes. While many of the terms used mystify outside observers, they enable specialists to interact meaningfully and to advance knowledge in their particular discipline.

In many of the social sciences vocabulary must be developed to describe intangibles. Often these intangibles are substantive. However, because there is confusion or disagreement about their meaning, considerable energy is expended in trying to establish commonage. In the field of politics the term power supplies an example. Power has been as difficult for political scientists to formulate as community has been for sociologists. For example, power has been defined as:

1. "the capacity to induce others to act in accordance with one's will,"[1]
2. "the ability to control the decision-making process,"[2]
3. "participation in the making of decisions,"[3]
4. "the acts of men going about the business of moving other men to act in relation to themselves or in relation to organic or inorganic things."[4]

Because power means different things to different people, a kind of contagion results which similarly affects related terms. Thus authority, force, influence, and pressure also yield varying connotations. One result of this inability to establish common terms is a lack of agreement among scholars in answering such questions as:

1. Is power made evident by a class of acts or can it be recorded in stasis?[5]

2. In A-B relationships is power equally present if we assume B acts in response to orders from A; B acts in response to speculation of A's wishes; A penalizes B for not acting or not acting as he desired?[6]
3. Is power the use of social energy; is it the capacity to mobilize such energy; or is it some combination of these?

The second problem is collecting evidence. By this is meant documenting how power operates, assuming we hold some definition for it. This problem of documentation contains at least three subproblems: overcoming obstacles to collecting information, using appropriate techniques for collecting data, and developing theory.

Let us assume for purposes of illustration that our goal is to understand more fully how the schools of a certain city are run. We would like to know more about the sources, motives, resources, communications networks, and techniques of individuals and groups who significantly affect local schooling. Some individuals and groups channel their interest in the schools as members of the authoritative or legal governance structure; others operate outside of this framework in extralegal ways, i.e., while they do not occupy authoritative positions within the school's official governance system, they nonetheless affect local schooling. Their influence could be a decisive factor in the decision to change a certain policy, to retain the school budget, to fire a teacher, etc.

What are some of the obstacles to perceiving the realities of the exercise of power in our example? Perhaps the primary one is privacy. An investigator may attend an open meeting of the board of education and chart communication involving board members, administrators, and representatives of lay and professional groups. However, he or she might not be allowed access to an executive session held prior to the open meeting. Perhaps there

in a stormy session a flammable issue was thrashed out; now in the open meeting it comes up for vote and is settled quietly and unanimously.

Likewise it is possible that prior to the meeting the superintendent decided not to bring up a matter for review. It can be argued those who make nondecisions, thereby preventing others access to decision-making or the shaping of decision-making, wield power.[7] Nondecision-making is often secretive. In some instances the arena for making it is the locked up mind of a single individual.

Another obstacle for the person attempting to get at power reality is its intangible and often idiosyncratic nature. To what extent does power, for example, relate to feelings of confidence, both by A and by B? Was the negotiated contract between the school board and the teachers' organization the result of the board's greater confidence that its potential sanctions were stronger than the teachers'? If this is a factor, how can it be measured?

A second subproblem in collecting evidence is determining which data-gathering techniques are most suitable. In the brief history of power analysis the the two most common methods used often yielded different results and produced a bitter methodological controversy between sociologists and political scientists.[8] Sociologists more frequently assume an ordered system of power. An expected question that would provide data for sociologists would be Who runs the schools here? Sociologists frequently discover a monolithic power structure.

On the other hand, a basic assumption of many political scientists is that different power structures emerge as a result of shifting issues. An expected starting point for political scientists investigating the schools in our illustration would be What are recent key issues and decisions in which local schools were involved? Political scientists often find multiple power structures for a particular locality.

Do we conclude that reported variations in power structure patterns

are the results of geographical, economic, historical, and social factors that distinguish schooling from district to district, or are these findings at least partially the fruits of the respective methods and biases of the investigators? If the latter possibility exists in fact, it may mean researchers are simply finding what they are looking for.

The third subproblem is caused by the inability to develop adequate theory. According to Wirt and Kirst there is a definite need for a scheme for organizing concepts and data in order to analyze, to test propositions, and to make intelligent predictions.[9] These writers complain that in the place of explanations based upon causal theory, the literature is filled with descriptions, evaluations, and prescriptions. What we have then, according to Wirt and Kirst, is a grab bag of partial theories and contrasting methods.

Wirt and Kirst believe the best form of theory available to students of the politics of education is "heuristic theory," which is not a predictive scheme but rather a method of analytically separating and categorizing items in experience. Most heuristic models attempt to describe the channeling of power from a variety of sources and take into account barriers to its flow, conversion procedures, and feedback mechanisms. Heuristic models commonly depend upon systems analysis.[10]

The third problem, measurement of power, reveals once more the importance of the first problem, i.e., the need for clarifying basic terms. Understanding and agreement of the concept of power will not assure freedom from difficulties in quantifying it. But it seems reasonable to assume that lack of understanding and agreement about the meaning of power will mutiply such difficulties.

For example, power can be viewed as a possession, a resource which enables individuals and groups to obtain their will.[11] On the other hand, power can be considered, not as possessive or substantive, but as relational.[12]

Thus a power relationship could be conceived as being dependent upon the relative importance of conflicting values in the mind of the recipient in the power relationship.[13]

Suppose we have identified the concerned constituencies composing two sides of an unresolved issue and wish to predict its outcome on the basis of which side is more powerful. If we view power as a possession, we could attempt to estimate the power holding of each side.

If, on the other hand, we conceive of power in relational terms, our approach to measurement would become psychological. We might begin by attempting to determine the scope, weight, and domain of power, i.e., the range of values affected in this particular situation, the degree to which they are affected, and the number of people affected.[14]

The final problem, that of change, comes about because the forces under consideration fluctuate. For example these forces might include people, roles, institutions, biases, values, actions, and reactions. Power structure has been described as a schematic diagram that depicts the elements of a power system at a given point in time. Returning to public education, such a diagram might be an accurate portrayal of reality for a particular school or school system at the moment it is constructed, but for how long will it continue to be valid?

Four serious problems of power analysis affecting the governance of local public schooling have been presented. They are troublesome to those who would like to obtain a better understanding of those forces which affect the organization, administration, and control of schooling. But if one believes in democracy, these problems hold an importance beyond mere scholarly curiosity. If schooling like other agencies of government truly belongsto the people, then in a democracy universal understanding is an urgent condition for public supervision. Power analysis provides a legitimate and worthwhile means of adding to that understanding.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Alan A. Altshuler, Community Control: The Black Demand for Participation (New York: Pegasus, 1970) p. 62.

2. William V. D'Antonio and William H. Form, Influentials in Two Cities: A Study in Community Decision-Making (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) p. 10.

3. Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1950) p. 75.

4. Floyd Hunter, Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: 1953) pp. 2-3.

5. Michael Aiken and Paul E. Mott, editors, The Structure of Community Power (New York: Random House, 1970) p. 5.

6. See "Power," in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (New York: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, 1968) Vol. 12, pp. 405-414.

7. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp.43-46.

8. David Ricci, Community Power and Democratic Theory: The Logic of Political Analysis (New York: Random House, 1971) chs. 5-11.

9. Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst, Political and Social Foundations of Education (Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1972) pp. 11-20.

10. See, for example, David Easton, A Framework for Political Analysis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), _____, A Systems Analysis of Political Life (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1965) ch. 2, and _____, Varieties of Political Theory (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966) ch. 7.

11. Russell Bertrand, Power: A New Social Analysis (London: G. Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1938) p. 35.

12. Jack Nagel, Some Questions about the Concept of Power," Behavioral Science, March, 1968, pp. 129-137.

13. Bachrach and Baratz, op. cit., pp. 19-25.

14. Ibid., p. 25.

John E. Cooper
Professor of Education
State University College
Oswego, New York 13126